

LITTLE ESTHER GROWS UP

Paul's Mall recently was the scene of the re-emergence of a seasoned performer. Esther Phillips, known hitherto as "Little Esther," treated a mostly gay, mostly Black audience to her personal, gutsy renditions of pop standards.

Born in Galveston, Texas, and raised in Los Angeles, she began her singing career at the age of six in a Sanctified Church, becoming a professional performer at thirteen when she won a talent contest at Johnny Otis' Barrelhouse Club in Watts. Otis was so impressed with the young girl's poise and talent that he signed her to appear with his band. "... It was weird that I was travelling around singing, because I had never planned to become a singer. Before I started singing, all I wanted to do was be in the Air Force," she said.

Esther began her set with "Alone Again, Nat'rally," the title song from one of her earlier albums. Immediately she put the audience in a festive mood. Esther used to her own advantage the fact that the song has too many words in too short a period of time. With a fast, smooth blend she zipped through the number; the audience applauded wildly at the remarkable ease with which she was able to handle the lyrics.

When she was only 15, "Double Crossing Blues," her first hit, sold over a million copies, and helped establish "Little Esther" across the country. That was in 1949. "Dinah Washington and Sarah Vaughan were the first female singers I listened to. Then I started listening to Billie Holliday. I guess those three had the most influence on me . . . But I think I really adopted by style from Dinah."

At Paul's Mall the true remarkabil-



PORTRAIT OF A DISCO ARTIST

ity of her style was showcased in "And I Love Him." Purr-ing, like a lioness,

she attacked the Lennon-McCartney hit as if it were written for her, and her

alone. Some blues artists wail, not Esther; she sings from the depths of her insides, emotionally and physically, projecting a rumble, not a cry. "And I Love Him" was the title song of a 1965 Atlantic album, the first she had recorded since her 1963 country hit, "Release Me," which ended a long personal drought in Ms. Phillips' professional career. In 1969, after another eclipse, she signed with the newly formed Kudu Label, where she is today.

In 1973, when Aretha Franklin was awarded a Grammy for the "Best Rhythm and Blues Performance by a Female Vocalist," she rose and told the gathering that Esther, who had also been nominated, deserved the Award more than she did. The following day, in a moving, simple, and unprecedented gesture, she gave her Award to Esther.

Backed by bass and rhythm guitars, organ, drums, and tenor sax, Esther quickly buzzed in and out of "When the Sun Goes Down." Then, to everyone's surprise, she sang her disco hit, "What A Difference A Day Makes," and left the stage, never to return, disappointing many of her fans. When the management of Paul's Mall was questioned on the shortness of the set, they pleaded innocence, saying that the artists were responsible for the quantity of their performance. They were noticeably upset and the situation was rectified toward the end of Ms. Phillips' engagement.

"I don't think I could be called a pop singer," Esther comments, "or a blues singer for that matter. I'm just a singer . . . That's because I look at each song individually, and if I can identify with it, then I sing it."